

Agriculture As the Backbone of India: A Gandhian Philosophical Perspective



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Abstract

Agriculture remains India's economic backbone, cultural identity, and social fabric, providing livelihoods for all but half the population, food security, rural livelihood, and ecological balance. Mahatma Gandhi's idea of Gram Swaraj (village self-management) located agriculture at India's moral and material heart of freedom and development. Gandhi advocated ecologically balanced small-scale cultivation, dignity of labor, and strong village communities—values foresightful of modern agroecology and sustainable development paradigms. This paper re-examines Gandhi's agrarian ideas, outlining its values and moral imperatives. It critically reflects upon contemporary Indian agriculture problems: degradation of soil health, water shortages, market volatility, farmer indebtedness, and environmental degradation. In contrast, we outline "Reclaim Gandhian Agriculture" strategies through revitalized village economies, large-scale adoption of agroecology, empowered cooperatives, and value-oriented education (Nai Talim). Case studies demonstrate how Gandhian values may be implemented, from Sikkim's organic revolution to Andhra Pradesh's Zero Budget Natural Farming. A mix of Gandhi's moral vision and contemporary policy tools provides a transformational model for India's twenty-first-century sustainable, inclusive, and resilient agriculture.

1. Introduction

India's rural roots run deep: over 50% of the population is directly dependent on agriculture, and the sector contributes nearly 18% of national GDP (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 2023). Contemporary India, however, is confronted with paradoxes: food excesses and pockets of undernourishment; record harvests, and farmer suicides; productivity gains triggered by the Green Revolution countered by soil degradation and water depletion. These paradoxes necessitate a paradigm shift from reductionist technology-fix solutions to consider ethical, social, and environmental dimensions of agriculture.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) viewed agriculture as a spiritual vocation, the very embodiment of human dignity and public benefit. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi strongly believed, "India lives in her villages." Gandhi believed that real self-government (*Swaraj*) must begin in the village and in autarkic agriculture (Gandhi, 2001, p. 20). His thoughts—now labeled as anti-modern—were based on a profound critique of unbridled industrialization and capitalist exploitation. Gandhi promoted bread labour (honest manual work), non-violent land holding, ecological balance, and decentralization of economic power.

2. Gandhi's Agrarian Philosophy: Foundations and Principles

Mahatma Gandhi's visionary ideas for India's destiny were inextricably woven with an agrarian philosophy that sought to build a society based on justice, equality, and sustainability. His radical ideas precede their general recognition. They presented a holistic strategy for rural development, with a focus on self-reliance, the intrinsic dignity of work, bio-equilibrium, and a pragmatic, life-skill-based education. These core ideas, if adopted, contain the transformative potential to reconstruct India and present a powerful model of global sustainable living.

2.1 Gram Swaraj and Agrarian Self-Sufficiency

Gandhi's key concept of *Gram Swaraj*, or village self-governance, envisioned each village as an energetic, self-governing society – a real "miniature republic" with indigenous control over its economy, justice system, and educational system (Parel, 1997). The foundation of this self-governance was an economy based primarily on agriculture. Gandhi firmly believed that each village should be capable of producing its minimum requirements: staple foods for self-consumption, fibres for garments, and basic commodities for domestic use. This localized production system was intended to greatly lower reliance on distant, often exploitative, foreign markets and shield people from the risk of international price volatility and geopolitics-related supply chain disruptions, hence their economic sustenance and autonomy.

Above all, this pursuit of self-sufficiency was never intended to be a credo for isolationism. Gandhi painted a dynamic vision of voluntary exchange of surpluses between villages, with symbiotic exchange where communities drew mutually from shared resources as well as specialty produce. He believed strongly that such decentralized systems would effectively democratize wealth, with economic power far and wide rather than concentrated in metropolitan cities. This, in itself, would effectively stop the negative spirals of urban migration, with rural communities being able to prosper. Most importantly, this model would firmly anchor political power in citizen institutions at the local level, with local populations being enabled to determine their own futures and governance systems actively.

2.2 Labour, Dignity, and Ethics of Farming

One of the pillars of Gandhi's moral system was the philosophy of "Bread Labour," which he did not regard as drudgery but as a deep moral duty. In his seminal book, *Key to Health*, he wrote that "those who refuse manual labour lose their right to food earned by others" (Gandhi, 1948, p. 15). This principle naturally elevated the dignity of farmers to higher ranks than mere labourers to the noble rank of land managers and guardians of life itself. He was a vocal critic of the widespread alienation of industrial capitalism, whereby capitalists were reaping enormous profits while the labourers who created that wealth were struggling themselves to earn mere subsistence wages, creating a deep ethical imbalance.

To Gandhi, moral farming implied much more than individual effort. It involved guaranteeing satisfactory returns to farmers, so that they received proper prices for their hard-earned labour and produce. Beyond that, he advocated radical but fair land distribution, in contrast to the then-existing concentration of land in a few hands, leaving people poor. His vision was to have collective ownership patterns, where resources and land could be possessed and managed in common for the good of all. He had a clear vision of cooperative spinning mills and agro-processing factories, well-managed by empowered village panchayats (self-governing councils). These community-owned, grassroots industries would significantly value-add to farm produce and generate much-needed local employment, thereby building a strong, self-sustaining rural economy.

2.3 Non-Violence (Ahimsa) and Ecological Harmony

At the philosophical heart of Gandhi's philosophy was *ahimsa*—non-violence—a principle which he lived by day after day not merely in human interactions but in general in nature as well. He was a strident critic of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which he predicted to "kill the very life of the soil" (Guha, 2006, p. 112).

This was a very advanced position for its time, anticipating modern environmental concerns. In their stead, he espoused natural, corrective mechanisms such as composting, green manures, and multiplication of local seed varieties—now at the center of today's organic and regenerative agriculture movements.

His vision for agrarianism positively promoted diversity: the promotion of practices such as intercropping, agroforestry, and mixed farming. Integrated systems such as these produce mutually beneficial synergies between microbes, animals, and plants, developing soil fertility and ecological resilience. This ecological farming practice naturally reduces dependence on external inputs, reducing greenhouse gas emissions substantially and preserving valuable water resources. These principles are perfectly suited to today's climate resilience goals, demonstrating Gandhi's profound insight in promoting agricultural practices that are both highly productive and ecologically sustainable, guaranteeing long-term sustainability of land and its human occupants alike.

2.4 Nai Talim: Education for Sustainable Rural Life

Gandhi's revolutionary education philosophy, Nai Talim (Basic Education), was an integrated one that blended mental, manual, and moral development in harmony and specifically focused on preparing people for the world and village needs. Gandhi believed that children must learn knowledge and skills by direct participation in traditional village crafts such as spinning, weaving, carpentry, and agriculture (Gandhi, 1956). This participatory, experiential model of learning was created to equip them with functional skills directly applicable to the needs of their community to make them self-sufficient and highly responsible for their community.

This pedagogic model sought to break down the artificial distinctions between "thinkers" and "workers," emphasizing the equal dignity and intrinsic value of intellectual and physical labor. All-round development was the goal, rearing children who were not just intellectually gifted but also competently skilled, ethically grounded, and ecologically situated in their local world. In rural schools implementing this model, children would actually work in kitchen gardens, grind cereals, and study local ecologies, making learning an embodied, lived practice. Such an education, inextricably linked to the local world, would instill a lasting reverence for the land, nurture active solidarity with peasants, and cultivate the critical ability in context-specific solutions to the specific issues of their rural world.

3. Modern Indian Agriculture: Challenges and Contradictions

Despite dramatic advances and policy efforts to expand food production, modern Indian agriculture is plagued by issues and internal contradictions. Despite the fact that India became food self-sufficient, it has done so with an extremely high social and environmental cost, the majority of which tends to be in direct opposition to the sustainable and equitable goals of Mahatma Gandhi.

3.1 Farmer Distress and Farmer Suicides

India's agrarian economy is in very serious trouble, the grim reality underlined by the horrific suicide rates of farmers. Over 10,000 farmers commit suicide annually, a poignant indicator of entrenched systemic issues, estimates the National Crime Records Bureau (2022). The underlying causes of this distress epidemic are multifaceted: compounding debts, driven in many instances by the absence of formal credit; the whimsical nature of monsoons, leading to uncertain harvests; and discriminatory, exploitative patterns in marketing that leave farmers vulnerable. Small and marginal farmers, who account for a staggering 85% of India's farm households, are disproportionately affected, facing severe credit constraints, volatile market prices for their produce, and poor bargaining power (Government of India, 2023).

While early on very successfully raising wheat and rice yields through monoculture, the Green Revolution pushed traditional hard, coarse cereals and pulses aside by default, lowering the nutritional diversity of diets. Further, intensive farming methods, coupled with excessive use of synthetics, have resulted in a sudden loss of soil organic matter—up to 40% in intensively farmed areas—radically reducing natural fertility and creating a continually increasing dependence on chemical fertilizers (Shiva, 2016). This has trapped farmers in a vicious circle of rising input costs and poor soil health.

3.2 Industrial Agriculture and Gandhian Ethics

Mass spread of Green Revolution technologies—such as high-yielding crop varieties, large irrigation canals, and intensive agrochemicals—were the focal point of transforming India from a food-deficit country to a food-surplus country. But at what tremendous environmental and societal costs. The continuous drive for ever-increasing yields led to over-drafting of groundwater, with alarmingly declining water tables. Widespread application of pesticides gave rise to pest resistance, requiring ever-increasing doses, and exposed farm communities and consumers to great health risks.

Apart from this, the corporatization of farming, facilitated by the expansion of contract farming frameworks and the emergence of large retail chains, has further disempowered small farmers. Agribusiness giants, leveraging their market concentration, dictate prices and quality standards, in effect undermining individual farmers' autonomy and agency. This process directly resonates with Gandhi's warning of monopolistic capitalism, which remains valid today in the world as policy debates, particularly over contentious farm bills and corporatized

foray into farming, continue to concentrate further. Power concentration in the hands of a few corporates undermines the ideals of decentralized control and economic justice for which Gandhi stood.

3.3 Rural Marginalization and Policy Gaps

Current government programs, such as Minimum Price Support (MPS), Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN), and soil cards, for the most part offer palliative relief and not the removal of the cause of farm distress. They do nothing to shift power relations within the sector or enhance ecological resilience in any meaningful manner. Land reform, necessary to right historical wrongs and promote productive agriculture, has been half-hearted at best; a whopping 60% of operational farms in India are less than 2 hectares in size, a fragmentation that strongly discourages economies of scale and diminishes farmer profitability (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022).

In addition, critical extension services to disseminate farm know-how and best practices are woefully underfunded. They are skewed towards recommending chemical-intensive solutions, which fuels excessive dependence on non-sustainable methods. Government expenditure on agriculture has also been mired at a meager 1% of GDP, which is widely perceived to be too low to initiate the overall rural turnaround that India desperately needs. This underinvestment is fueling the vicious cycle of low productivity, constrained innovation, and persistent marginalization of the rural masses.

3.4 Environmental Degradation and Climate Change

Indian agriculture is a major contributor to climate change and is highly vulnerable to its impacts. Agriculture accounts for approximately 18% of India's total greenhouse gas emissions, with monumental contributions from rice paddy methane and nitrous oxide from nitrogen chemical fertilizers. This vulnerability is highly exacerbated by more erratic monsoons, rising temperatures, and frequent weather-related disasters. Farmers incur billions of rupees annually in crop losses due to devastating heatwaves, unseasonal pre-monsoon rains, and other extreme weather events (Niti Aayog, 2021).

Additional enormous pressure is exerted on critical water tables as a result of fractured land ownership and too-heavy reliance on intensive irrigation methods. Aquifers in key agricultural areas, like the Indus basin, are being withdrawn at unprecedented and unsustainable levels, threatening the long-term sustainability of irrigated agriculture and, consequently, national food security. This form of environmental degradation worsens farmers' socio-economic woes, calling for a paradigm shift towards more sustainable and resilient agricultural methods.

4. Reclaiming Gandhian Agriculture: Pathways Forward

Recapturing Gandhian agricultural ideals is more a practical move toward building sustainable and equitable rural economies in the future than a theoretical nostalgia for the past. By marrying new technologies with old wisdom, we can forge a way toward self-sufficiency and ecological harmony in India's agricultural economy.

4.1 Revitalizing Village Economies

Reviving village economies is about reviving Gram Swaraj without sentimentalizing the village but endowing it with contemporary tools and enabling local self-governance. We are talking about strengthening PRIs to confront farm inputs, credit cooperatives, and market linkages, thus decentralizing decisions. We must implement the creation of Producer Companies in village clusters for collective procurement, processing, and marketing as Gandhi had visualized cooperative mills (Saraswati, 2019).

Most importantly, agro-processing factories—such as oilseed presses, millet flour mills, and vegetable drying facilities—can confer high value locally to the nation. Physical infrastructure such as rural roads, cold chains, and rural marketing centers should complement online platforms such as e-NAM (National Agriculture Market) to facilitate efficient market access to farmers.

4.2 Encouraging Agroecology and Organic Agriculture

Agroecology embodies Gandhian principles of diversity, recycling and community. These take the form of crop rotation, intercropping, integrated pest management, and on-farm composting. Sikkim's recent declaration as a completely organic state in 2016, made feasible through subsidies, capacity building, and seed banks, is an influential example. This shift resulted in a 20% rise in mean smallholder incomes (Sikkim Organic Mission, 2022), showing the economic efficiency of organic conversions.

Similarly, Andhra Pradesh's Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) promotes the use of locally found inputs—such as Jeevamrutha (microbial biomass), Panchagavya (cow-based foliar spray), and organic mulches—without including the expense of external and chemical inputs. ZBNF pioneers have achieved stability and considerable input cost savings of up to ₹15,000 per acre per year (Rao & Raju, 2020), revealing the economic benefits of chemical-free agriculture.

4.3 Farmer Collectives and Cooperatives Strengthening

Gandhi considered village spinning and agro-processing cooperatives as great cooperative tools for creating wealth. Modern cooperatives can take it a step further by incorporating mechanization (tractors and threshing

equipment), storage (warehouses and silos), and marketing (brand building and export linkages). Amul experience in milk andIFFCO experience in fertilizers demonstrate the huge potential of cooperatives (Kurien, 2006).

There must be strong policy support in terms of availability of inexpensive credit, capacity building, and legal assistance to empower a new generation of FPOs. The FPOs will be in a position to spearhead the initiative of negotiating improved contracts, establishing quality standards, and introducing geotagged traceability, hence empowering smallholders to negotiate on an equal platform.

4.4 Rural Universities and Moral Education

Renovation of Nai Talim involves incorporating Gandhian values into agricultural university curricula and Krishi Vigyan Kendras. Organic farming, rainwater harvesting, and seed conservation training modules of hands-on nature must be supplemented by experiential learning in villages. Rural innovation centers with students, farmers, and researchers may help deliver location-specific solutions in the shape of solar dryers, manual tillers, and effective rainwater harvesting systems (Joshi & Sharma, 2021).

Besides, the integration of social entrepreneurship studies can motivate youth to stay in villages and establish agri-startups that are socially responsible and profitable and contribute to the development of a prosperous rural economy.

5. Case Studies and Contemporary Reflections

The long-term relevance of Gandhi's philosophy of agriculture is not a hypothesis; it is being tested and validated in real terms by many grassroots and state-level movements throughout India. These new case studies are providing real-life evidence that decentralized, organic, and people-centered systems of agriculture are viable, offering tangible alternatives to the prevailing industrial paradigm.

5.1 Sikkim's Organic Transition

The Indian Himalayan state of Sikkim is a model of sustainable agriculture transformation. Starting its ambitious journey in 2010, Sikkim undertook a gradual, incremental journey to entirely eliminate chemical inputs in its agriculture, successfully reaching its target by 2015. The state government wholeheartedly encouraged this bold initiative, actively sponsoring key projects like setting up direct market linkages to urban areas, developing specialized seed villages for indigenous varieties, and implementing stringent organic certification procedures. As of today, over 75,000 hectares of Sikkim's agricultural land are formally certified organic (Sikkim Organic Mission, 2022). The transformation has brought spectacular socio-economic dividends, with per capita incomes of households rising by 12%. Sikkim's tale of success is a time-tested one, beautifully exemplifying Gandhi's dreamt synergy of local empowerment, judicious ecological stewardship, and deep self-reliance, demonstrating that an organic shift of a state is possible and economically viable.

5.2 Deccan Development Society (DDS), Telangana

Founded in Telangana in 1983, the Deccan Development Society (DDS) is a true embodiment of Gandhian ideals in action at the grassroots. DDS collaborates closely with marginalized tribal women's sanghams (collectives), on the reconstruction of traditional millet-based cropping systems, on claiming major seed sovereignty, and on constructing effective women's leadership at the community level. Their innovative "people's processing centers" and community-managed grain banks are concrete, living expressions of Gandhi's emphasis on cooperative toil and farm work's inherent dignity. By reviving and promoting nutritionally rich and drought-resistant millets, DDS has successfully transformed local diets, significantly improving food security and family incomes for concerned communities (Odetta, 2018). This project demonstrates the strength of empowering local knowledge and collective action to construct resilient and equitable food systems.

5.3 Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF), Andhra Pradesh

Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) in Andhra Pradesh is a mass-scale transition to low-cost, natural farming methods in close sync with Gandhian philosophy of self-reliance and simplicity. Over 600,000 farmers across the state have embraced this chemical-free farming system. Farm-level effects have been highly encouraging, with uniform yields even in poor drought years, along with a remarkable 100% return on savings in input costs to farmers. The state government is actively encouraging this transition, providing "learning grants" for establishing and operating farm schools where farmers share knowledge, and mobile app-based advisories with on-the-fly technical support. The demonstrated scalability of ZBNF hints at the immense potential of combining Gandhian principles of simplicity and use of local inputs in mainstream government extension systems (Rao & Raju, 2020). This indicates the way in which a bottom-up, ecologically

6. Conclusion

Reinventing agriculture as India's lifeblood needs to go beyond technical fixes to adopt an integral approach that bridges ethics, ecology, as well as equity. Gandhi's vision of agrarian society built a century ago is still convincing to the ages: climate resilience, empowerment of farmers, and sustainable livelihoods. India can chart

a path to inclusive and regenerative agriculture through adopting Gram Swaraj, bread labour, Ahimsa, and Nai Talim in policy frameworks and people's movements of today.

The challenge is daunting: entrenched inequalities, ecological catastrophes, and market distortions. Yet the Sikkim, DDS, and ZBNF case studies demonstrate the promise of Gandhian praxis. Replication at scale is a social process: constructing local democracy, financing agroecology, developing cooperatives, and reimagining agricultural schooling. As India grapples with the double challenge of nourishing human beings and saving the planet, Gandhi's appeal to "live simply so that others may simply live" offers moral vision and practical wisdom.

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Conflict of Interest

I hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the authorship, research, or publication of this article. All views and interpretations expressed in this paper are solely mine and do not represent the perspectives or policies of any affiliated institution or funding agency.

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